What Is “Indoctrination”?

Abstract “Indoctrination” is a term which refers to the intent to impose ideas or beliefs upon people in areas that ultimately call for individual reflection, decision-making, and choice. It is a distasteful activity because it is aimed at limiting the individual’s ability to think and choose. Religious or moral education are not necessarily indoctrination and it is possible to create a Jewish education that is not indoctrination.

Keywords Indoctrination • Intention • Teaching from within

Religious education and moral education have the dubious distinction of being associated and equated with “indoctrination”. This chapter deals with the concept of indoctrination by asking three questions: (1) What is indoctrination? (2) Are religious and moral education the paradigm cases of indoctrination? (3) Is a Jewish education that is not indoctrination possible?

This chapter is based on chapter 5 in Barry Chazan, *The Language of Jewish Education: Crisis and Hope in the Jewish School*. New York: Hartmore House Press, 1978.

“INDOCTRINATION” AS AN EMOTIVE TERM OF DISAPPROVAL

The most immediate and striking sense of the word “indoctrination” is its use as an emotional expression of disapproval. Even those who believe that there are moments when schools and teachers need to take strong stands actually show a reluctance to use the word “indoctrinate”, since it suggests a distasteful or nefarious activity. What are the characteristics of this activity that leads many people to have such strong reactions?

INDOCTRINATION AS A METHODOLOGY

One explanation of the word “indoctrination” regards it as the transmission of certain contents that uses a methodology of *not* presenting all sides of a subject or “stacking the deck” by selecting facts and ideas that will guarantee the acceptance of specific ideas or beliefs. Such a methodology includes incomplete or one-sided arguments, deliberate falsification or suppression of evidence, impassioned and emotional slogans, and preaching rather than teaching, all of which are aimed at the imposition of specific ideologies in the minds of students.

It must be said that most schooling at certain times utilizes methodologies related to such areas as attendance decorum and behavioral standards that may seem arbitrary but are ultimately “rules of the game” that enables schools to function. Similarly, the use of force is not automatically indoctrination if aimed at preventing damage, disorder, or a more serious danger. Indoctrination as a methodology refers to manipulation of the mind rather the body. Hiding facts, disparaging student opinions, or rejecting any ideas that contradict the teacher’s beliefs are examples of indoctrination. Indoctrination is a means of forcing, brainwashing, or imposing desired ideologies without open discussion. The notion of indoctrination as a methodology refers to authoritarian ways to manipulate rather than educate the mind.

INDOCTRINATION AS CONTENTS

A second understanding of the word “indoctrination” proposes that it is not the *methods* used that characterize it, but rather the *contents* or subjects being taught. Indoctrination occurs when schools and teachers intend to present certain kinds of contents as fact when they are really just opinion or belief. Teaching the core principles of physics is not

indoctrination because it is based on shared knowledge and research. However, imposing certain moral, religious, or political positions, is regarded as indoctrination because it is not based on shared knowledge and research but are matters of personal opinion and feelings. This approach assumes that the contents of education must be subjects which "any sane and sensible person" would accept, while the contents of indoctrination are the opposite (Snook 1972). Therefore, if we are to avoid indoctrination, the *contents* we teach must be rational in the sense that they are validated by publicly available and accepted evidence.

The "subjects" which are regarded as the exemplars of potential indoctrination are religion, politics, and morality. These subjects are regarded as prime contents of indoctrination because they are ideologies and/or beliefs systems which are not known to be true or false and whose verification is speculative. In our contemporary world, the list of potential subjects prone to indoctrination has expanded and for some critics it also includes the teaching of history, social studies, and civics, which increasingly regarded as tools in the hands of indoctrinators (Beyer and Apple 1998). The group of educationists sometimes denoted as "the Critical School" argue that much of what is part of the regular school curriculum today is not shaped by facts but by the viewpoints of certain power brokers or ideologues whose intent is to impose values and worldviews rather than to open minds and nurture critical thinking.

INDOCTRINATION AS INTENTION

A third approach to indoctrination claims that while the methodologies and contents schools are well-intentioned in their attempt to explain indoctrination, they have missed the core defining characteristic. Sometimes the so-called "methods" of indoctrination are useful in certain areas of education in which there are basic skills sets or contents to be learned. The notion that certain contents define indoctrination also misses the point. It is not morality, religion, or politics that constitute indoctrination, but rather the *intent* of the teachers in teaching these subjects. Religion, politics, and morality are important parts of the history of human life and deserve to be studied. The problem is that very often the teaching of these subjects is less about learning and more about imposing worldviews and beliefs systems on the young. The "intention" approach argues that indoctrination is characterized by the aim or desire to inculcate unshakable beliefs in others in a non-questioning, non-critical,

non-rational manner: “Indoctrination begins when we are trying to stop the growth in our children of the capacity to think for themselves” (Hare 1964). Champions of this approach indicate that the danger of religious, moral, or political education is that it often becomes the means by which a teacher or school inculcate and impose viewpoints, perspectives, and beliefs on the young, rather than analyzing and explicating the origins, meanings, and outcomes of holding such beliefs. Indoctrination is not about *what* you teach or *how* you teach but, ultimately, about *why* you are teaching it.

ARE RELIGIOUS, POLITICAL, AND MORAL EDUCATION INDOCTRINATION?

It is clear why religious, political, and moral education are so often connected with indoctrination. These topics involves spheres of reflection, behaviors, and standards which are typically regarded as personal matters of choice, and therefore not within the purview of schools. From ancient times until today, the spheres of religion, politics, and morality have encompassed questions and issues that personally affect our lives in relationship to others and to the world. Religion, politics, and morality are important topics in the history of humanity and in contemporary life, but the red light of indoctrination is ignited when teachers forget that teaching is aimed at learning, not imposition.

CAN THERE BE JEWISH EDUCATION THAT IS NOT INDOCTRINATION?

In this chapter, we have examined diverse attempts to explain indoctrination and, while each attempt has pluses and minuses, ultimately it seems that indoctrination is the definitive intention to inculcate and impose a belief system and a set of behaviors on young people even if this means denying them the ability to reflect, think, and ultimately decide for themselves.

This discussion leads us to the question as to whether it is possible to talk about Jewish education without indoctrination in our times. While the subject of religion is not in itself indoctrination, there have been numerous eras and frameworks in which the teaching of religions in general—including Judaism—has seemed indoctrinatory. Jewish education,

like other forms of religious education, can well lend itself to such a possibility.¹

That being said, it is possible to delineate the parameters of an approach to Jewish education which is not indoctrination. There are four cornerstones of such a Jewish education: (1) intention, (2) core texts, (3) the student as philosopher, and (4) teaching from within.

Intention

Jewish education without indoctrination focuses on presenting core ideas, values, and behaviors of Jewish religion and civilization in a way that enables young people to ask questions, and discuss the meaning of these ideas. Such a Jewish education does not focus on inculcating viewpoints or programming behaviors, but on opening the mind and heart of young Jews to the richness of Jewish civilization and its relevance for contemporary life. The intention of this approach is to teach- and not to preach- in a way that honors the ability of the young to think, feel, and act.

Core Texts

The second cornerstone of a Jewish education without indoctrination is the treasure chest of texts of the Jewish canon. (Crenshaw 1998; Dorff and Crane 2013; Stampfer 2010). While Jewish tradition is full of an endless selection of “quotable quotes”, and even “do’s and don’ts”, it is the opportunity to “meet in person” the ideas of the great texts which can be so engaging and exciting for the young.² Textbooks and short slogans give answers, but they steal the question from the young. The opportunity to open the “treasure chest” of Jewish texts and read them together with peers and teachers should be at the heart of such an open Jewish education.

The Child as Moral Philosopher

The third cornerstone of Jewish education without indoctrination is the ability of the young to question, reflect, and think. This psychological and philosophical assumption has been a prominent theme of late twentieth and early twenty-first-century educational psychology and philosophy:

Parents and teachers are often so impressed with the burdens they bear in having to nurture, instruct, reassure, and inspire their children that they fail

to appreciate what children have to offer adults. One of the exciting things that children have to offer us is a new philosophical perspective. (Matthews, *The Philosophy of Childhood*, p. 14)

We used to think that babies and young children were irrational, egocentric, and amoral. Their thinking and experience were concrete, immediate, and limited. In fact, psychologists and neuroscientists have discovered that babies not only learn more, but imagine more, care more, and experience more than we would ever have thought possible. In some ways, young children are actually smarter, more imaginative, more caring, and even more conscious than adults are. (Gopnik, *The Philosophical Baby*, p. 5)

We need to listen carefully because sometimes the young hide their inquisitiveness by using the word “bored” or by putting their head on the desk. Indeed, if they say they are bored, we need to listen because maybe we are boring. Many visits to many classrooms in many places have convinced me that our young are hungry to talk *with* us rather than be talked *at* by us. We need to excite them and let these young philosophers talk together with incredibly engaging ideas, sources, and texts.

Teaching from Within

The fourth cornerstone is best explained by the remarkable educationist Parker Palmer, who has taught us about the hidden wholeness, the courage to teach, teaching from within, and so many other ideas fundamental to twenty-first-century education and life. Parker Palmer suggests that the key questions facing education are not only “what”, “how”, and “why”, but “who” (Palmer 2007). He suggests that “the inner landscape of the teaching self” or the “teacher from within” is central to the story of education. In choosing a career in teaching, people are committing themselves to a life-long profession of passion, not simply a job. The teacher’s internal landscape includes intellectual, emotional, and spiritual elements:

Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher”. (Palmer, pp. 8–10)

The “teacher from within” needs content knowledge, pedagogic content knowledge, and the awareness that he/she is shaped by ambiguities, humility, diversity, and even conflict. We should not be afraid of these

feelings as they are a part of teaching from within—“ultimate faith is ultimate doubt” (Tillich 2011). There could not be a more appropriate description of the role of the teacher in such a twenty-first-century Jewish education than the multi-dimensional teacher with the courage to teach as described by Parker.

It is the synthesis of these four cornerstones—intention, core texts, the child as philosopher, and the teacher from within—that, together with the appropriate effort, good will, and investment in our professionals, could create a rich interactive and meaningful Jewish education which does not come to impose Jewish from without, but rather enables Jewish values to develop from within.

NOTES

1. For discussion of the susceptibilities of Jewish education to be indoctrinary see Barry Chazan “Should We Teach Jewish Values?” in *Studies in Jewish Education VI*. The Magnes Press, pp. 66–83.
2. Contemporary Jewish educational thinking highlights pedagogies focused on utilizing classical texts to make them accessible to young people in contemporary Jewish educational frameworks (Handelman 2011; Holzer 2016; Holzer and Kent 2013; Levisohn and Fendrick 2013; Levisohn and Kress 2018).

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